Some Notes About Semester Reviews (i.e. “Crits”)

From time to time students come to me with questions about what crits is supposed to be and why the process is useful. I thought it might be appropriate at this point to address a few of those issues. The following is just one person’s opinion, someone who has been on both sides of the process.

Occasionally, the idea gets out there that your crit is supposed to be the primary faculty feedback for the whole semester. Everyone needs to remember that primary feedback should be handled one on one between instructors and students. If you believe you are not getting the access you need to faculty you should make an appointment with the instructor. If you fail to get what you need from that you should pursue a more formal process starting with your advisor. Although some class feedback does happen at crits, this really is not what they’re about.

Lacking a better analogy, a semester crit is like a “State of the Union” for your education. Twice a year we take time out for each student to present their work to the entire community; faculty, staff and students. It is an opportunity for everyone involved to see what you are doing and hear how you feel about the process.

Some of the things appropriate to present include the classes you took, examples of successful (and perhaps unsuccessful) work from those classes. It really isn’t necessary to present every project from any class. We’d also like to hear how you felt about your work in the class; if you thought you applied yourself and if you’ve improved as a professional. This is also an appropriate time to comment on if you believe a class is consistent or inconsistent with your educational goals and to suggest changes to classes or curriculum that might make them more focused. You should also let us know what classes you have coming up that you are excited about and/or dreading and why.

You should discuss each of your production assignments and show examples of the work you did in those assignments. Calendars, memos & schedules are absolutely as valid a display as draftings, renderings & models; it isn’t a competition, everyone has a rough idea of what to expect to see — and if we’re lucky we’ll see something unexpected. You should let us know how you though the production process went, what worked well and what didn’t, what you conquered and what still might have you befuddled, and again if you thought you grew as a professional as a result of the process. This is an excellent time to let everyone know what you think would be good assignments for you for the next semester.

It is also appropriate to briefly mention things that are happening to you away from this building. If you have involvement with any campus organizations, outside work, or interesting family goings-on they are well worth bringing up. We definitely would like to hear what your plans are for the summer — or what you did the previous summer.

You should also take some time to evaluate your position in general. Is the aggregate experience you are having at CMU consistent with your current goals? What are those goals and what are you doing to move toward them?

Your presentation and demeanor should show respect for the process, the other presenters and to all the people there to listen. Dress should be consistent to what you would wear to a job interview. You should spend some time deciding what work to present and go over what you are going to say in advance. There certainly is room for “non-standard” presentations and even humor in this process, but if you elect to go that way you need to be sure that you still cover all the bases and that you combine that levity with a demonstrated respect for the process. Also, this is an individual event. Everyone should prepare his or her own, separate presentation.

This process has value, in and of itself, as a project. In the professional world you will often have to do presentations. In interviews, project presentations, commercial pitch sessions and many other situations the same skills you will be honing at crits will serve you well.

Crits is a very important component of our program. Mostly it lets everyone get on the same page about what you are doing. It helps to establish a presence for you with faculty that may not have you in class and with other students with whom you may not normally interact. This goes a long way toward helping your work and process being respected on production projects. It also lets your instructor from one class see the work you’ve been doing concurrently in other classes, perhaps helping to properly frame their evaluation of the work you did for them in the context of your overall load or demonstrated focus. This is an opportunity for everyone to hear your goals and the tools you believe you need to get to them; and your take (right or less right) on where you stand in that process.

Many of the decisions that affect you both individually and as a group, from academic actions to curricular changes, are made by the Design and PTM faculty as a whole. This is your best chance to have your interests, goals and concerns heard by that entire group. This opportunity is really unprecedented in the community of other schools and departments. It really is to your advantage to make good use of it.